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## Perceptions of Poverty: A Study of Food Secure and Food Insecure Households in an Urban Area in South Africa

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### Abstract

The concept “food security”, together with the understanding of poverty, has evolved since the World Food Conference in 1974, and the debate surrounding food insecurity has shifted to the household level. Recent studies claimed food insecurity as increasingly urban. The literature on theories of poverty focuses primarily on the conservative view based on the explanation that poverty is caused from an individual perspective or, blaming the victim. In this context the literature on the perceptions of the causes of poverty holds that individuals are themselves to blame for their poverty situation (Individualistic); or poverty can be explained as a consequence of economics, politics and cultural factors in society (Structural); or that poverty is the result of illness or bad luck (Fatalistic). This study compares the perceptions of the causes of poverty, of food secure and food insecure households. A quantitative research method was deployed, and 580 questionnaires were administered to a stratified random sample of two low-income neighbourhoods in Southern Gauteng, South Africa. Using the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), households were analysed in terms of their food security status. Three causes, namely individualistic, structural and fatalistic perceptions of the causes of poverty were derived through factor analysis. The study found significant differences with regard to the perceptions of poverty between food secure and food insecure households. In this regard food secure households view individualistic reasons as the root cause of poverty, whereas food insecure households view society and fatalistic causes, the causes of poverty.

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**Keywords:** Food Insecurity, Perceptions of poverty, poverty, Household food insecurity, Urban food insecurity.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept “food security”, together with the understanding of poverty, has evolved since the World Food Conference in 1974, and the debate surrounding food insecurity has shifted to the household level (Maxwell, 1996). Several researchers in the 1990’s predicted that the focus of poverty, and specifically food security, would probably shift to urban areas (Ravallion, 2002; De Haan, 1997; Moser, 1996; UNICEF, 1994). Several studies highlighted that poverty status of households in urban areas may be a key driver to food security on the household level. This implicated that access to food and expenditure on food in poor areas would depend on whether households in urban areas would have enough income to purchase food (Adato & Basset, 2012; Tsoka & Reichert, 2011; Hoyos & Meveden, 2009; Migotto, Gero & Kathleen, 2006; Behrman & Deoler, 1988). In order to eradicate poverty and to ensure sustainable economic growth, the key developmental goal of all governments around the world has been to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty, ensuring access to basic needs such as clean water, access to food, and medical treatment (World Bank, 2007). In this regard food security status of a household indicates also the poverty status of the respective household. This implies that to fully understand the food security status of a household, a better understanding of the poverty status of a household may be necessary, to develop solutions for specific communities. In this regard people may perceive poverty and also the causes of poverty differently. The need to understand what the poor think or perceive to be the causes of poverty may explain the effort or lack thereof on their part in addressing their food insecurity situation.

Central to this study is to get a better understanding of how households perceive the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. Some of the well documented perceptions in the literature include individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes for poverty (Bullock, 1999; Ditch, 1984; Feagin, 1972). The paper therefore explores perceptions of the causes of poverty among households in low income urban neighborhoods, in South Africa. In this regard households were divided into food secure and food insecure households, where food insecure households were regarded as poorer households. This study therefore aimed at examining the perceptions of food secure and food insecure households on the causes of poverty.

In this study food insecurity is used as a measure of poverty, and therefore households are divided into food secure and food insecure households. Perceptions on poverty of food secure and food insecure household heads are measured. An understanding of perceptions on poverty may help to develop policies to eradicate food insecurity and poverty specifically in urban areas. Knowledge of the perceptions on the root causes of poverty may help policy makers to develop specific policies to help eradicate food insecurity and poverty in general. Hence, the purpose of this study is to get an understanding of the perceptions on poverty of low income urban household heads.

The outline of the study is as follows: Section 2 discusses the relevant literature to poverty, perceptions on poverty and food insecurity. Section 3 discusses the purpose of the study. Section 4 discusses the background to the study area Section 5 discusses the research methodology, measuring instrument and sampling. Section 6 presents the findings with regard to the perceptions on poverty by food secure and food insecure households. Section 7 draws a conclusion and makes some recommendations to policy makers.

## 2. Perceptions on Poverty and Food Insecurity

In 1990 the World Bank state with Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that the world must halve the degree of poverty by 2015. However, the number of people in Sub-Saharan Africa who live below the poverty line of 1 US \$ per day increased since 1990 (Foeken & Owuor, 2008; Armstrong, Lekezwa & Siebrits, 2008). South Africa in this regard was no exception where people living in poverty has not changed significantly. In fact households in poverty sunk deeper into poverty (Bhorat, Van der Westhuizen and Cassim, 2009; Schwabe, 2004;). Food security can be considered as a critical problem facing policy makers in sub-Sahara Africa (Drimie & Casale, 2009; Maunder & Wiggins, 2007). This suggests that food insecurity may pose new challenges to urban planners. Research predicted that the focus on poverty, specifically food security, would probably shift to urban areas (De Haan, 1997; Moser, 1996; UNICEF, 1994), while food insecurity will most likely occur in low-income areas (Mello *et al*, 2010; Nord & Parker, 2010; Furness *et al*, 2004). This may be the result of demographic and economic challenges associated with urbanization (Ravallion, 2002).

Research indicates that food availability may not be the only condition for food security, especially if households lack the financial or productivity resources necessary to acquire food (Adato & Basset, 2012; Miller, Tsoka & Reichert, 2011; Migotto, Gero & Kathleen, 2006). This implies that food insecurity in urban areas may require a different approach to eradicate urban food insecurity. Central to this question is the perceptions of root causes of poverty.

Food security for the purpose of this study is defined as a state in which “all people at all times have both physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996; USAID, 1992). The concept of food security, together with an understanding of poverty, has evolved since the World Food Conference in 1974, and the debate surrounding food insecurity has shifted to the household level (Maxwell, 1996). Several studies have provided important insights into the experiences of households concerning food insecurity. These experiences include feelings of anxiety over food shortages, perceptions that food is of an insufficient quantity, perceptions that food is of an insufficient quality, reported reductions of food intake, reported consequences of reduced food intake, and negative feelings surrounding socially-unacceptable means of obtaining food (Radimer, Olson & Campbell, 1990; Radimer, Olson, Greene, Cambell & Habicht, 1992).

The literature on theories of poverty refer to the conservative view which bases the explanation of poverty on the individual (Schiller, 1989; Ryan, 1976), and the liberal or progressive theories which based the explanation of poverty on society or social functioning (Goldsmith & Blakely, 2010; Jennings, 1999). Bradshaw (2006) contended that a number of authors have made the same distinction, pointing out that virtually all authors distinguish between theories that the root the cause of poverty in individual deficiencies (conservative) and theories that lay the cause on broader social phenomena (liberal or progressive). Literature identifies four main categories of perceptions on the causes of poverty namely; Individualistic Fatalistic Structural and Psychological (Mullaly, 2007; DiNitto, 2000; Feagin 1972). The measurement of the perceptions in this study is based on the classification of Feagin (1972).

Campbell (2001) found that structural causes of poverty are more strongly indicated as individualistic or fatalistic causes by respondents. Studies by Bullock and Waugh (2005) and Hunt (1996) indicate both structural and individualistic causes for poverty, as indicated by respondents.

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted in the Emfuleni municipal area, Southern Gauteng, South Africa. The area consists of six semi-urban low-income areas, namely Evaton, Sebokeng, Sharpeville Boipatong, Bophelong and Tshepiso. Bophelong and Sharpeville as low income areas were selected randomly to be sampled. The total population of the Emfuleni municipal area is 721,633, and the population of Bophelong is 37,779 and the population of Sharpeville is 41,031. In Bophelong 8152 households of a total of 12352 households live in poverty. In Sharpeville 3609 households of a total of 8374 households live in poverty. (Statistics SA, 2011). A quantitative research approach involving the administration of a questionnaire to the selected sample was employed.

#### *Sample*

A stratified sample of households in the low income neighborhoods was drawn and every second household was sampled to be interviewed. Only heads of households were interviewed by interviewers, and both male and female household heads were interviewed. A total of 580 households were interviewed by fieldworkers. Fieldworkers were trained specifically to prompt heads of households with regard to their perceptions on poverty and food security status. Fieldworkers proficient in African languages as well as English underwent training to prompt household heads for their views on food security and perceptions on poverty. In this regard validated scales to determine food security status and perceptions on poverty were used.

### Measuring Instrument

A nine-item food insecurity scale, developed by USAID'S FANTA project, was used to measure food insecurity. The measurement instrument follows a progression, beginning with anxiety about food supply, followed by questions about the quality of food, then questions on the quantity of food consumed, and the last questions on going to sleep hungry, or going all day and night without eating (Deitchler, Ballard, Swindale & Coates, 2010). Respondents were requested to answer Yes or No to the nine questions in the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) questionnaire, indicating how often this happened, namely: rarely (once or twice in the past four weeks), sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks) or often (more than ten times in the past four weeks). Four types of indicators were then calculated to categorize households into four groups, namely: food secure, mildly food insecure, moderately food insecure, and severely food insecure. For this study households were then grouped into two groups, namely food secure and food insecure households (Mild food insecure, moderately food insecure and severely food insecure).

To measure the perceptions of household heads on the causes of poverty, three groups on the causes of poverty, namely individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes were constructed using factor analysis (Feugin, 1972). The three factors were extracted from 12 statements about individual's perceptions of the causes of poverty. The reliability of the instrument to measure the perceptions was tested. Finally, Chi square tests were conducted to ascertain the statistical significant differences between the two groups, with regard to their perceptions of poverty.

### 4. Data Analyses and Interpretation

Based on the HFIAS score, households were categorized into two groups namely, the food secure households and food insecure households. Table 1 shows the number of households in the different categories of food security, ranging from food secure to food insecure. In the sample 227 households were food secure, while 353 or 60.86 percent of the households are mild, moderately or severely food insecure.

Table 1. Food Security Status of Households

| HFIAS Category                      | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Food Secure Households              | 227       | 39.14      |
| Mild Food Insecure Households       | 64        | 11.03      |
| Moderately Food Insecure Households | 86        | 14.83      |
| Severely Food Insecure Households   | 203       | 35.00      |
| Total                               | 580       | 100.00     |

Table 2, shows the demographic characteristics of the food secure and food insecure households. The average household size of the food secure households in the sample is 3.93 members, compared to 4.32 members in the food insecure households. The average age of the head of the household in food secure households are 47.41 years, compared to 51.45 years of the head of household in food insecure households. The number of years schooling of the head of household of food secure households are 11.41, compared to a lower number of years schooling of 8.44 years of food insecure households. Food secure households income was also higher at R 12082.48, compared to R 4165.84 income of food insecure households. The HFIAS score of food secure households were 2.46 compared to 14.74 of food insecure households (The HFIAS score range from 0 to 27, where 0 indicates complete food security and 27 complete food insecurity).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of Food Secure and Food Insecure Households

|                          |                                | N   | Mean     | Std Dev. |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|----------|----------|
| Food Secure Households   | Household Size                 | 227 | 3.93     | 1.51     |
|                          | Age of Head of Household       | 227 | 47.51    | 12.55    |
|                          | Education of Head of Household | 227 | 11.14    | 3.63     |
|                          | Income of Household            | 227 | 12082.48 | 6176.76  |
|                          | HFIAS Score                    | 227 | 2.46     | 3.57     |
| Food Insecure Households | Household Size                 | 353 | 4.32     | 1.73     |
|                          | Age of Head of Household       | 353 | 51.45    | 14.71    |
|                          | Education of Head of Household | 353 | 8.44     | 3.50     |
|                          | Income of Household            | 353 | 4165.84  | 2888.38  |
|                          | HFIAS Score                    | 353 | 14.74    | 4.13     |

Three causes of poverty, namely individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes of poverty were derived through exploratory factor analysis. The results of the factor analysis in Table 3 were extracted from the 12 statements about the perceptions of the causes of poverty by household heads. Direct Oblimin rotation was used to extract the factors. Table 3 shows that individual causes of poverty comprise statement 1 to 3. The items that loaded on the underlying individual factor were: 'They lack the ability to manage money' (0.887), 'They waste their money on inappropriate items' (0.911) and, 'They do not actively seek to improve their lives' (0.851). Structural causes for poverty comprise item 4 to 6. The items that loaded on the structural factor were: 'They are exploited by rich people' (0.803), 'The society lacks social justice' (0.864), and 'Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven' (0.801). Items 8 to 13 loaded on the fatalistic factor: 'They live in places where there are not many opportunities' (0.491), 'They have bad fate' (0.753), 'They lack luck' (0.618), 'They have encountered misfortunes' (0.824), 'They are not motivated because of welfare' (0.733), 'they are born inferior' (0.708). Results show also that the first factor, namely, individualistic causes explained 28.41 percent of the common variance with an Eigen value of 3.693. This factor was reliable ( $\alpha = 0.861$ ), Structural causes of poverty explained 15.91 percent of the common variance with an Eigen value of 2.068. This factor was reliable ( $\alpha = 0.768$ ). The Fatalistic causes explained 12.69 percent of the common variance with an Eigen value of 1.651. Fatalistic causes were reliable ( $\alpha = 0.768$ ).

Table 4 shows the results of the perceptions of food secure and food insecure households on poverty. Chi square tests shows that statistical significant differences exist between the food secure and food insecure households with regard to their perceptions on individual and structural causes of poverty. No statistical significance between the groups could be found with regard to fatalistic causes. Table 4 indicates that the majority of food secure households (62.5 percent) agree with the statement 'they lack the ability to manage money', compared to food insecure households (65.6 percent) who disagree with this statement (Sig. 0.000;  $p < 0.005$ ). Food secure households agree (60.1 percent) with the statement 'They waste their money on inappropriate items', whereas food insecure households (67.9 percent) disagree with this statement (Sig. 0.000;  $p < 0.005$ ). On the statement 'They do not actively seek to improve their lives', 60.7 percent of food secure households agree with the statement, whereas 68.2 percent of food insecure households disagree with the statement (Sig. 0.000;  $p < 0.005$ ). This indicates that food insecure households have the perception that poverty is not caused by the individual, compared to food secure households who feel that the individual should be blamed for their poverty situation. On the structural causes of poverty, food secure households disagree (66.9 percent) with the statement 'They are exploited by rich people', compared to 55.4 percent of food insecure households who agree with this statement (Sig. 0.000;  $p < 0.005$ ). Food secure households (60.5 percent) disagree with the statement 'The society lacks social justice', whereas food insecure households (53 percent) agree with the statement (Sig. 0.005;  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 3. Factor analyses of perceptions of the causes of poverty: Individual item loadings.

| Reasons why people are poor   | Factor 1:<br>Individualistic<br>Causes | Factor 2:<br>Structural<br>Causes | Factor 3: Fatalistic<br>Causes |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| They lack the ability to manage money                                   | <b>0.887</b>                           |                                   |                                |
| They waste their money on inappropriate items                           | <b>0.911</b>                           |                                   |                                |
| They do not actively seek to improve their lives                        | <b>0.851</b>                           |                                   |                                |
| They are exploited by rich people                                       |  | <b>0.803</b>                      |                                |
| The society lacks social justice  |  | <b>0.864</b>                      |                                |
| Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven                         |  | <b>0.801</b>                      |                                |
| They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families |  |                                   |                                |
| They live in places where there are not many opportunities              |  |                                   | <b>0.491</b>                   |
| They have bad fate  |  |                                   | <b>0.753</b>                   |
| They lack luck  |  |                                   | <b>0.618</b>                   |
| They have encountered misfortunes                                       |  |                                   | <b>0.824</b>                   |
| They are not motivated because of welfare                               |  |                                   | <b>0.733</b>                   |
| They are born inferior  |  |                                   | <b>0.708</b>                   |

Food secure households (60.7 percent), feel that the distribution of wealth in the society is even, where 52.5 percent of food insecure households disagree that the wealth is evenly distributed (Sig. 009;  $p < 0.01$ ). On the statement “They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families” 64.2 percent of food secure households disagree with the statement whereas, 55.6 percent of food insecure households agree with this statement (Sig. .000;  $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that food insecure households blame structural causes, or society for poverty. The implication of this is that food insecure households may feel that Government should provide social security, and that they themselves are not responsible at all for their food insecurity situation.

On the fatalistic causes, 55.1 percent of food insecure households agree with the statement ‘they have bad fate, compared to 53.9 percent of food secure households who disagree with this statement (Sig. .020;  $p < 0.1$ ). No statistical significant differences between the groups could be found, with regard to the statement ‘they have encountered misfortunes (Sig 0.516;  $p > 0.1$ ). Food secure households feel that ‘They are not motivated because of welfare’ (52.7 percent), compared to food insecure households who feel that they are motivated because of welfare (53.1 percent) No statistical significance could be found with regard to this statement. Thus, food insecure households agree with fatalistic causes of poverty.

Results thus indicate that food insecure households blame society and to a lesser extent fatalistic causes for their poverty status. Food secure households on the other hand, feel that the individuals in food insecure households are to be blamed for their situation. The implication of this is that policies to eradicate food insecurity and poverty in general should take note of food insecure household’s perception that they are not responsible for their situation, and that it is the sole responsibility of society/Government to solve their food insecurity situation. This indicates that poverty should also be addressed on the psychological level and not only in monetary terms.

Table 4. Perceptions on Poverty: Food Secure and Food Insecure Households.

| Reasons why people are poor   | Food Insecure Households |             | Food Secure Households |             | Chi Square Tests |
|---|--------------------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------|------------------|
|   | Disagree                 | Agree       | Disagree               | Agree       |                  |
| They lack the ability to manage money                                   | <b>65.6</b>              | 37.5        | 34.4                   | <b>62.5</b> | .000             |
| They waste their money on inappropriate items                           | <b>67.9</b>              | 39.9        | 32.1                   | <b>60.1</b> | .000             |
| They do not actively seek to improve their lives                        | <b>68.2</b>              | 39.3        | 31.8                   | <b>60.7</b> | .000             |
| They are exploited by rich people                                       | 33.1                     | <b>55.4</b> | <b>66.9</b>            | 44.6        | .000             |
| The society lacks social justice  | 39.5                     | <b>53.0</b> | <b>60.5</b>            | 47.0        | .005             |
| Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven                         | 39.3                     | <b>52.5</b> | <b>60.7</b>            | 47.5        | .009             |
| They lack opportunities due to the fact that they live in poor families | 35.8                     | <b>55.6</b> | <b>64.2</b>            | 44.4        | .000             |
| They live in places where there are not many opportunities              | 47.9                     | 51.0        | 52.1                   | 49.0        | .282             |
| They have bad fate  | 46.1                     | <b>55.1</b> | <b>53.9</b>            | 44.9        | .020             |
| They lack luck  | 46.8                     | <b>54.9</b> | <b>53.2</b>            | 45.1        | .033             |
| They have encountered misfortunes                                       | 50.0                     | 50.2        | 50.0                   | 49.8        | .516             |
| They are not motivated because of welfare                               | 47.3                     | <b>53.1</b> | <b>52.7</b>            | 46.9        | .097             |
| They are born inferior  | 47.1                     | <b>53.4</b> | <b>52.9</b>            | 46.6        | .080             |

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to determine the perceptions of the root causes of poverty of food secure and food insecure households, in a low-income urban neighbourhood. The perceptions on poverty were analysed. The results show that households categorized as food insecure feel that society is to be blamed for their poverty and food insecure household status. This is line with previous studies (Campbell, 2001; Davids and Gouws, 2011). In this regard food secure households feel that the individual should be blamed for their food insecurity status and poverty status in general. From a policy perspective, the problem of food security can be attributed to socio-economic factors, but perceptions on the causes as indicated by food insecure households may be important to policy makers to understand when they formulate policy.

Food insecure households or poor households may feel that Government should provide social security, and that they themselves are not responsible at all for their food insecurity situation. It is suggested that policymakers consider the perceptions on poverty as part of developing a policy framework towards addressing poverty in low income neighbourhoods.

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